From Traditional to Contemporary in Second Language Teaching

Reflections on changes and differences between Western and Eastern learning styles and priorities.

The term “pendulum effect” seems to be frequently used these days in articles relating to the TESOL profession. By this term, writers mean the rapid and ongoing changes in TESOL classroom philosophies and practices.

The “pendulum” can be looked at from two angles, namely (1) methodology and (2) Western vs. non-Western learning styles. This article will discuss these two aspects to determine whether or not the wild swing of the last 25 years between traditional and contemporary language teaching and learning methods has begun to stabilise, and whether the current trend is effective notwithstanding the cultural setting in which it is applied.

Western and Eastern Learning Styles

The two poles of the pendulum are epitomised by the contrast between traditional Western and Eastern learning styles. One source, writing of Chinese scholarship, explains:

Learning is mere acceptance of traditional knowledge banded down from generation to generation without change. The word “to learn” has no other meaning but “to imitate.”

On the other hand, Ballard and Clanchy describe Western learning as follows:

From their first year at college, students are trained to consider critically everything they read or hear; it is not presumptuous, they are told, for a student to raise questions about the wisdom of respected scholars—it is mandatory.

The first philosophy places the teacher in a position of absolute authority, allowing no room for discussion or debate. In contrast, college teachers in Western institutions follow the principle of encouraging their students to think and learn independently, as well as to develop analytical and questioning abilities.

With this backdrop, a “clash of the Titans” has the potential of unfolding between a contemporary foreign teacher ready to encourage creative thinking, and an Asian student, pen in hand, poised to copy down everything.

Methodologies

What is the best approach? Is there, as Prator says, “a coherent system of ideas that the conscientious teachers-to-be can tap into”? Not likely! What is obvious, if you sample TESOL curriculum written over the last 50 years, is that there is a great diversity of methodologies that various people have propounded to be correct. These include the Direct Approach, the Situational Approach, the Audio-Lingual Approach, and so on.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, there was a preoccupation with methods, and the focus of attention was on finding the “right” method. These included Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response, the Silent Way, and more (Nunan).

Prator suggests that even though controversies exist in the search for a reasonable language teaching methodology, there are three cornerstones foundational to any acceptable methodology:

**Linguistics:** The nature of language in general.

**Psychology:** The nature of the learner, and the nature of the teaching/learning process.

**Aims of instruction:** That is, what things must the learner be able to do in or with English?

In terms of linguistics, contemporary thinking is that it cannot be taught in isolation, as it casts very little light on the human element in the language teaching equation. As Prator explains, teaching materials which have been developed directly by narrowly-oriented linguists, with pages of drills on meaningless sounds, excessively unfamiliar terminology and symbolism, dis-
connected sentences unrelated to reality, and an attitude of indifference to true communication may be sound linguistically, but are certainly not models of effective teaching practice. The relationship between linguistics and language teaching needs to be carefully balanced so that it is neither too dependent on nor too exclusive of the linguistics element.

The other two aspects concerning the nature of the learning/teaching process—psychology and the aims of instruction—will be discussed later.

Changing Role of the Teacher

One of the main reasons for moving away from more traditional approaches is simply because learners could graduate from a program, yet still not be able to communicate in the real world outside the confines of the classroom. As Nunan states, the ultimate goal is to enable the learner to communicate with others in the world beyond the classroom where they will not have a teacher at hand. This suggests an approach where the teacher transfers power to the student and in effect becomes a facilitator. One such system of methodology that has received much notice in the West is known as the “communicative approach.”

The communicative approach may be defined as:

An integrated skills approach whereby the main focus is for the learner to communicate in the target language where the content is focused on semantic notions and authentic social functions which reflect real-life situations and demands.

In this context, Nunan states that a teacher’s primary role is the provision of pedagogical opportunities through which learners can structure and restructure their own understanding.

Though this approach seems sound in theory, degree and setting are paramount in determining whether it will be a success or a failure. One cannot successfully implement the communicative approach without first researching the educational background of the culture where teaching takes place. In a Western institution, where this approach is common, it is likely to be well-received.

However, given the background of Asian culture as previously discussed, this approach can soon put a teacher in a quandary, wondering why this “latest and greatest” method is not having the desired effect. As Nunan points out, rather than learning how to use the language creatively, students spend most learning time copying and reproducing language written down by others. This mindset is further fueled by an examination-driven education system. A teacher is likely to come up against a class full of passive learners who are wondering why this enthusiastic and animated teacher is pushing them to do things that are contrary to their educational upbringing.

This points to a need for teachers to be wise when planning a communicative syllabus. Most important is for the teacher to carry out research on the cultural history of learning to which students have been exposed. Once this has been established, goals can be set as to what might realistically be achieved in the given timeframe of the course. A teacher should look at the continuum of where students are and where they are going, and slowly but progressively move them from their comfort zone into the unknown territory of participatory learning.

This progressive approach does not only include course content, but also methods of classroom organisation. It would be a mistake for a teacher to begin from the outset by moving desks around, breaking a class up into groups, and beginning discussions on a variety of topics. As learners are gradually and moderately encouraged to take their focus away from the teacher and to interact with their fellow students, so the organisation of the classroom can simultaneously be rearranged. Instead of sitting in straight rows facing a teacher, desks can be arranged in such a way as to encourage more natural conversation, for example, in a horseshoe shape. This is not always possible since some desks are screwed to the floor, preventing effective small group activities. In this case, the situation calls for extra creativity on the part of a teacher, for example, taking learners outside to sit on the ground in groups.

Reproductive vs. Creative Learning Tasks

Traditional teaching roles can be described as seeing learners as passengers being carried forward in the learning process by the teacher (Nunan)—a situation in which learners practice patterns provided by teachers, textbooks, and tapes. They are thus cast into passive, reproductive roles, humorously called “linguistic quarantine stations.”

The prospect of moving out of this comfort zone into a more creative but less structured environment is daunting for any language learner (not to mention
Before embarking on a journey towards creative language teaching and learning, it is important to encourage students to move toward an autonomous learning attitude, within which they take control of their language learning and the teacher comes alongside to support when necessary.

With this mindset, learners will be more motivated to use their own learning styles in exploring the world of creative language use. The benefits that are gained by learners in moving toward a concept of autonomy go much further than simply learning a foreign language. These skills provide a rationale for many different fields of study around the world. This philosophy ensures that a sustainable life skill is imparted to students which will equip them in various facets of their future lives.

Nunan describes creative language use as the recombination of familiar elements (words, structures, and prefabricated patterns) in new ways to produce utterances that have never been produced before by a particular individual. These opportunities are presented during activities such as role-plays, simulations, and problem-solving tasks which come as close to authentic communicative situations as possible. Other than going over certain drills, grammar rules, and so on, a teacher will mostly play a facilitation role in guiding and encouraging learners to engage each activity with boldness and confidence—essential ingredients when using a foreign language in a natural setting.

As many teachers will agree, this process takes a lot of patience and energy, moving learners “across the Rubicon” from passive, teacher-centred learning to active, creative, participatory learning.

Unfortunately, a creative learning environment cannot be maximised without sufficient out-of-class practice. In a setting in which English is taught as a foreign language—that is, in educational institutions where instruction in other subjects is not given in English—it is very difficult for learners to stay motivated when they have little or no opportunity to practise using the language authentically with native speakers.

To meet this challenge, teachers need to build into course content a section in which students are shown various strategies in activating language outside class. Nunan suggests that for every hour that is spent in the classroom, learners should find ways in which they will spend three hours outside the classroom systematically working on their language. Once again, this points toward learners taking charge of their own language learning program and realising that they are responsible for their own rate of progress.

Nunan suggests some out-of-class activities as follows:

- Engaging in peer review sessions.
- Conducting dialogue journals over the Internet with a native speaker.
- Taking part in conversation exchanges with foreigners who want to practice the language of the learner.
- Completing projects and surveys.
- Doing specific additional courses at an independent language learning centre.

This contemporary approach, in comparison to the safer, traditional approach, takes more effort and boldness, but the results will most certainly show which of the two is more effective.

A teacher starting out at a school which has never before used the communicative approach, or with students unfamiliar with this method, needs to be aware of a number of obstacles, as Diamond points out:

- Indigenous English teachers may feel that their English proficiency level is not sufficient to meet the requirements of a communicative classroom—thus, there might be resistance due to a fear of losing face.
- The traditional examination-driven system of education in non-Western countries is an impediment to change. The Grammar Translation Method is ideal for teaching to the examination, and for this reason most teachers are not willing to try new methodology.
- A college administration may resist changes in methodology due to a fear that along with the “communicative approach” comes Western cultural baggage that is often not wanted.

This does not mean that the introduction of a communicative approach is futile, it just means that care needs to be taken to look at history, culture, and current needs so that the methodology introduced does not ride roughshod over these issues.

Conclusion

The profession of TESOL seems to be coming of age, or reaching a state in which the main focus is first and foremost to meet the needs of the learner before satisfying other criteria. As a comparison, in the business sector we notice that those companies which are successful follow the tried and tested philosophy of meeting and satisfying the needs of the customers. The wise businessperson is aware of the different and sometimes
unique needs of the customer and adjusts strategies accordingly. So too, an English teacher needs to be aware of the different needs, backgrounds, and cultures of learners in order to implement the teaching strategies most effective for that setting and environment.

The “pendulum” seems to be slowing as more and more empirical research helps methodologists focus on those methods which are achieving the best results in the classroom. The effective teacher is one who continually reads up on the latest findings, then makes adjustments according to their personal experience gained from observing learners in their particular environment. The responsible teacher will also seek to persuade their non-Western colleagues to do the same, so that a sustainable TESOL program can continue long after they return home.

References


Tong, Jianping, and Ding Xinghua. “Cultural Influences Upon International Communication.” ELI Teaching 22, pp. 4-9, 1996.

Robert Brownrigg has been teaching in Vietnam since 1997, and is currently at Dalat University. He is working on an M.A. in TESOL. His son Cameron is pictured in the photograph on this page.

Spot Photo

Give this photo and exercise suggestions to students desiring extra practice, use it in tutoring situations, or collect it and other photos for classroom use.

Describe for a “blind” partner what you see in this picture.

Write a good descriptive paragraph about this scene.

Pretend you are giving advice to this boy about how to eat unfamiliar Vietnamese foods. If you wish, tell about a time when you encountered an unfamiliar foreign food.